Interview with Wallace W. Littell

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

WALLACE W. LITTELL

Interviewed by: Robert Martens

Initial interview date: October 1, 1992

Q: My name is Robert Martens, and I'm conducting an oral history interview with Wallace W. Littell — also known as "Pic" Littell — who for many years was a USIA officer connected with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe perhaps to a greater extent, or at least to as much of an extent, as anyone else connected with that field. Pic Littell was initially the first USIA representative in Eastern Europe in the early 1950s; later was Assistant Director of USIA for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, had three tours of duty in Eastern European posts namely Yugoslavia, East Germany and Poland, and later went back to the Soviet Union to head that program in Subsequent years.

Pic, could you start off by saying a few words about your early life?

LITTELL: Well, I was born on the 10th of February 1922 in Meadville, Pennsylvania. My father was professor of political science and history at Allegheny College and we moved out to Iowa in the midwest when I was two years old and I grew up out there. I did my undergraduate work at Cornell College of Iowa, and graduated in 1947 with a major in history, a minor in political science and languages. I went from there to the Russian Institute at Columbia, and was there from '47 to '49, completing the two year program with my masters in Russian history and the Certificate of the Russian Institute. From there I

went overseas on a graduate fellowship to study at Heidelberg University in Germany; and I went into government service in Germany when the High Commission took over from military government in 1949. Initially I was at the headquarters of Education and Cultural Relations in Bad Neuheim, and was then an America House director (these are the United States information centers in Germany) in Darmstadt. In February of 1950 I was sent up to Hannover in the British zone to establish the first America House (U.S. Information Center) outside the American zone of Germany.

Q: Then from Germany you came back to again attend the Russian Institute at Columbia University to work on your doctorate, I believe. That was, I think, in 1955-'56, the same period when I was sent to Columbia by the State Department to the Russian Institute and we first met.

LITTELL: That's right. I went from Hannover down to the embassy in Bonn in 1953 and for two years was editor of OST, Probleme (Problems of the East), which was a German-language digest of the Soviet and satellite press, and then came back on a study assignment to Columbia. I was pulled out of Columbia in April of '56, and sent to Moscow with the initial task of reestablishing the distribution of America Magazine (Amerika) which is a Russian-language, illustrated magazine in Life format.

Q: That magazine had existed in some form previously, I believe, in the war years and it had been canceled in the Stalin period.

LITTELL: That's right. It started out during the war, and was an exchange for a Soviet publication in the United States and was discontinued when the Soviets, at the height of the Stalinist period, were returning more copies as “unsold” than were allowed to be sold. This was 1953 and I went back in in '56 to reestablish distribution.

Q: How many copies were available on each side?

LITTELL: The initial distribution contract called for 50,000 copies to be distributed by SoyuzPechat the All-Union Soviet distribution agency, and 2,000 copies on a complimentary basis by the embassy. The agreement was negotiated initially with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SoyuzPechat and I dealt directly with SoyuzPechat after that with Boris Pavlovich Stepanov. I remember him as an honest rogue in the communist tradition. He had a good sense of humor and would take everything from you he could get and then some, but you could deal with him. He was later the first head of the State Committee on Radio and Television. The magazine was quite some time in coming out. It took us from June to September to negotiate the agreement and the first issue came out in October of 1956.

Q: My recollection, since I was in Moscow at the same time as a political officer in the embassy, is that the magazine was extremely popular. Any time you went on a trip and you carried America Magazine with you, everybody on the train would come around and want to borrow copies. On one occasion Ted Eliot and I were on a trip by vehicle down near Stalingrad and we had quite a number of copies — several hundred, I suppose, in the back end of our station wagon — and when we stopped alongside the road for some reason, a group of workers came by and as soon as they saw the America Magazine they started going to the rear of the car as fast as they could, and there was almost a small demonstration there. We were not able to control it. The popularity was so great they just went all over the place. In fact they probably had a considerable resale value, I would imagine.

LITTELL: Yes, there's no question about that. We had stories of an active black market in the magazine and were given dog-eared copies that were twice the original size because of the repeated turning of the pages. It was popular not only because it was a very good looking publication, but also because it was the only American publication, and actually the only western publication until the British worked out a similar agreement and distributed a quarterly magazine. Then the Germans also after they established diplomatic relations.

The problem, of course, was that, although we had a distribution agreement, you could never police it completely. We did establish that there were about 8 or 10 sales stands in Moscow that got it on a monthly basis, but they sold out in the first 10-15 minutes. In fact, eventually people were bribing the sales stand operators to hold a copy for them so that most of the copies were sold from under the counter. There were also copies sold in the ministries in closed kiosks that only the employees of the ministries could get to. Subscriptions were reserved entirely for the privileged few. The Soviet citizens would turn to us asking for subscriptions, and all we could do was refer them to SoyuzPechat, and of course, there were no subscriptions available there.

Q: The Soviet magazine, though, was not terribly popular, as I understand it.

LITTELL: The Soviet magazine was a little heavy on freight and ideology. They learned to be better on that, and it wasn't that bad. But, of course, it was in competition with the world market on American newsstand, whereas America Illustrated in the Soviet Union had no competition.

Q: I think the oldest joke in the Soviet Union was Pravda nyet Izvestia — Izvestia nyet Pravda. Pravda was the major newspaper and Izvestia was the second paper in prestige and size in the Soviet Union and the one word — Pravda means truth, Izvestia means news — and the joke, of course, and it went back to the early 20s, was that there's no news in Pravda, and there's no truth in Izvestia. That symbolized the attitude, in my opinion at least in the Soviet Union, that people disbelieved their own propaganda to such a degree that anything from the outside was extremely welcome, and that's why people listened to western broadcasts to a great extent, why they were jammed so heavily. But perhaps we can go on into some of these other subjects shortly.

LITTELL: Yes, I think also one of the most important things is that the Soviet efforts to control distribution of a publication like this, and to attack it in the papers and so on, and run it down, were completely counterproductive because the Soviet people thought, well,

if they're attacking it that much, and paying that much attention to it, it must be true. And consequently, I think, the Soviet public developed across the years a rather unrealistic picture of the United States as the promised land with no problems and everything gold and glitter.

Q: I ran into that on several occasions myself, but it's not my interview so I won't go into that.

LITTELL: Well, as I say, my first job was establishing the distribution of America Illustrated, but the area and policy offices back in Washington, were interested in broader areas of contact and public affairs than that...

Q: And there was no exchange program at that time.

LITTELL: There was no exchange program until 1958. However, we did have some exchanges which you'll recall, notably in performing arts. We had the Boston Symphony and Porgy and Bess was the first Broadway production of any type that came to the Soviet Union. And then we had opera singers like Jan Peerce, and Blanche Thebom, and they had a tremendous impact. I think Jan Peerce may have had the most personal impact because he had been a cantor in his synagogue, and he also spoke Yiddish. I remember very well, he was accompanied by Alexandrovna, who was the Intourist (KGB) control type, and she was completely frustrated because people would come up to him in the restaurant at the Metropole, and other places, and speak to him in Yiddish, and he'd speak back to them. In some of his encores he sang songs in Yiddish, which was the first time something like that had happened in the Soviet Union.

Q: This was probably after the 20th Party Congress.

LITTELL: This was, yes.

Q: Which was in early 1956.

LITTELL: That's right. When I went in, in early '56, the news of the crimes of Stalin speech, and the 20th Party Congress, weren't really out yet, and I assumed that my going was a result of the 1955 Geneva Conference of Foreign Ministers where the west had proposed exchanges and Molotov had rejected them as interference in internal affairs of the Soviet Union, and so on. But as the word came out of the 20th Party Congress, and as Khrushchev moved into power, I realized, and all of us realized, that this internal liberalization was something that resulted more from the 20th Party Congress.

Q: Of course, it was only a relative liberalization. I've seen a good deal in the press over the last few years in the United States that kind of recalls the post-20th Party Congress Khrushchev period as a sort of golden age of liberalism. But it really wasn't that. It was an extremely tightly controlled society, and only a very few areas opened up. There were no tourists whatsoever. Well, there might have been a few American communists, for example, or a few businessmen buying furs. But there was no real tourism in the Soviet Union even in those days.

LITTELL: No, that's very true. The Soviet Union we knew in those days was tightly controlled, and our access to the Soviet people was minimal, except we took those trips, and had some interesting talks with individuals on the trains. And then, of course too, the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution came along in '56 and that slowed things down considerably.

Q: Put a damper on right away, and then that was also followed by the so-called anti-party group affair the following summer, which put a damper on internally. So whatever liberalization was going on was kind of by fits and starts, and you would get a period where it would open up a bit, and would close down. So its been a very long, slow process to where we are today.

LITTELL: That's very true. I was in and out of the Soviet Union across the years, but then went back again from '79 to '83 as Counselor for Public Affairs and the contrast —

and this, of course, was before the current developments — but the contrast in access to people was really tremendous. I had contacts with literally all of the Soviet cultural intelligentsia, and got to know them very well in the '79 to '83 period.

Q: Why don't we go on to some of the other areas that you were speaking of?

LITTELL: I think, realistically, that across the years the Voice of America, which continued during the Stalinist period, and despite jamming, was accessible to the people in the period we were there, and across the entire period; I think the Voice of America probably had the broadest impact of any of our programs across the long scope of time. It was jammed in urban areas, as we know very well, but it did get through in the countryside and occasionally you could get it in Moscow in the vernacular languages. They broadcast in 16 Soviet languages plus English. The English was not jammed; there was spill-over jamming, but it was not jammed systematically and consistently. And this is where what is known as “the major Soviet news network” played in, “OBS, Odna babyshlha slkazala. One old grandmother told another;” i.e., word of mouth, played in, because people, when they got together among friends, would pass on what they'd heard on the Voice of America, or on other foreign radio. So I think it had a tremendous impact. And then the music programs among the youth; I've come to appreciate what they meant. All of the young Soviet leaders, except in the Komsomol, but maybe in the Komsomol too, as they moved on; and the creative intelligentsia, people like Vassily Aksyonov, the author, who is now in the United States of course, but also Andrey Voznesensky and Bulat Okudzhava, and the writers and poets and so on; jazz was really important to them. It was free expression. And popular music became important too. So I think the Music U.S.A. programs were important in that way.

Q: Some of the other stations were BBC, and of course Radio Free Europe which was much more jammed, much more political...

LITTELL: Yes, Radio Liberty...

Q: Radio Liberty, that's right.

LITTELL: Radio Liberty it was called in the Soviet Union. Radio Free Europe broadcast in Eastern European languages. That's very true, BBC was actively listened to, and had an excellent program. And Radio Liberty across the years, and RFE, have done tremendous research as well as their programming to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

I mentioned Aksyonov. I had an interesting conversation with him before he left the country and his citizenship was lifted. I asked him at one point what he thought had been the most important elements in the liberalization in the '50s and on into the '60s at the time when the relations were relaxing more and picking up, and he cited the first World Youth Festival in Moscow, which took place while we were there.

Q: It was actually the Sixth World Youth Festival.

LITTELL: The first one in Moscow.

Q: I attended it.

LITTELL: Yes, so did I. He said that was very important because it was meant to be a communist triumph, but actually what it did was introduce the Soviet youth to jazz and jeans, and to the outside world. And then he listed our American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 as a second element that had a tremendous impact.

Q: That was the first such exhibition. It was a total breakthrough. That's the one that Nixon attended and had the famous kitchen debate with Khrushchev.

LITTELL: Yes, the kitchen debate. Well, I was Director of policy and research for that exhibition so I spent a year on it, and was there during the exhibition, and actually tagged along with Nixon and Khrushchev on what was called the “kitchen debate”, which actually began in the art exhibit — the Museum of Modern Art Exhibit- -and carried on through the

exhibition and then bogged down in the kitchen of the model home because there were so many people crowding around that they couldn't get out to proceed further.

Aksyonov was also very positive on Khrushchev's expos# of the crimes of Stalin and so on, understandably because it resulted in the release of both of his parents from labor camps; his mother Eugenia Ginzburg, the author, and his father, who was a prominent party man down in Kharkov. He was close to Khrushchev's son; I met Khrushchev's son, Sergei at Aksyonov's dacha on a number of occasions, because Aksyonov felt that Khrushchev had rescued his parents, along with a lot of other people who were in the camps.

Q: The meetings with Aksyonov was in your second tour, not the first.

LITTELL: That's right. This was the '79 to '83 period; in the '56 to '58 period we just met permitted types and Foreign Office and Ministry of Culture people.

Q: Except on trips where you could talk to people more or less by accident.

LITTELL: Yes. We had that one trip which was particularly interesting down in the southwest frontier, of course.

I think on the other cultural items of that period, along with some of those that I've mentioned, the Van Cliburn success in the Tchaikovsky competition was sort of a breakthrough. It was the first time that an American had won the Tchaikovsky competition, or a westerner, as far as that's concerned, and it had a big impact on the young people. And I think they sort of pulled it off with their wild applause every time he played and appeared. That was an interesting development while we were there.

To return to Aksyonov, and the American National Exhibition, as you mentioned, it was the first time we did something like that and it was a large and very varied, and in retrospect, impressive exhibit. It had a lot of items on display. There was not only the Buckminster

Fuller geodesic dome, which was the first one seen in Europe to say nothing of the Soviet Union, but also in the dome Charlie Eames, the noted designer, did a multi-screen film which was on the United States — or American life — which was very impressive. IBM had their Ramac computers there; these were the first computers the Soviets had seen and they were programmed so people could ask them questions about the United States, and then in 400ths of a millisecond the printers would start printing out the answer to their question, and they could take it with them as a souvenir. “The Family of Man” exhibit, in the presence of Steichen, the photographer, and Carl Sandburg, the poet, his brother-in-law, was an interesting and important exhibit. Then the Museum of Modern Art did an excellent exhibit of modern art and sculpture, which was the first modern art and sculpture most Soviets had seen. There were fashion shows complete with music, and a beauty parlor, and all sorts of consumer goods, and cars, and the model American home, and voting booths. The Soviets could go in and vote on which items in the exhibit they liked particularly. I think the guides probably had the greatest impact. We had 79 young Americans who were fluent in Russian. These were the first Americans most Soviets had encountered and were able to talk to, and ask them questions. They were an outstanding group; in fact, one of them was recently Assistant Secretary of State for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Curt Kamman. And many of them have been prominent in academic and government roles. The guides, I think, of the items in the exhibit, including the traveling thematic exhibits we've run since in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, have been the single most important aspect. We've carried them on through the exhibits across the years. These exhibits have been to as many as six Soviet cities on a tour.

One of them that I particularly was impressed with, was the graphic arts exhibit. I was at the opening down in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, in 1964. It not only showed modern art, but also had a studio in which people were shown how to silk screen, which is a very good method of reproducing things, and any method of reproduction of information is important to the Soviet people.

Q: We've gotten over a little bit into — and that's fine — into the period after you left in 1958. The exhibit was in '59. The reason I mention this is that another major event occurred about this time already in '58, but the effects were really coming in more in '59, and after, and that was the signing and beginning of implementation of the first exchange agreement, and it was followed, of course, by a number of others which covered quite a number of areas. It covered cultural exchanges, information exchanges, scientific exchanges, student exchanges, exhibits, and some economic exchanges, and so on. You might want to mention a few words about your experiences with the implementation of this, the slow struggle to widen the contacts. My recollection, since I was also involved in the exchange program in those early years, was that the Soviets were to a great extent interested in the exchange program for scientific exchanges, and getting into fields that were useful to the development of their economy, and perhaps even on the military side, although we tried to limit that. Another point, I guess I've gotten into this partly because of something you said, was that in those early days it was very hard to get our people outside of Moscow and Leningrad. There was a tendency to limit the visits of Americans to the Soviet Union to just two or three cities, and the Soviets on the other hand were pretty much welcome throughout the United States, except that we began to limit them too in order to try to pry greater access loose. Do you want to comment on some of these things?

LITTELL: Well, this is sort of the paradox, I guess. We, who were pushing freedom and so on, were forced into their patterns, and forced to place things on a reciprocity basis. If they were going to control us, we had to control them, so that we could expand the number of cities we could get to, or the number of programs we could do. You probably recall, of course the exchange agreement was negotiated in Washington, but we backstopped it from Moscow, and were involved in that way, and then the first students came in in the fall of 1958, and four of our guides at the 1959 Exhibition actually were first year exchange students.

Q: I might throw in here that among that first group of Soviet students was Alexander Yakovlev who many, many years later became one of the key advisers in setting up Perestroika, and has played a very prominent role in the liberalization that occurred at great speed in the late 1980s and early '90s. And another student of that period was a fellow named Oleg Kulugin, who was in the KGB, and later became a major general but broke with the KGB, and denounced it, and has played a pretty strong role as well in the liberalization of the Soviet society. So one can look back on some of the effects now after all these years that were really even more than we expected, I suppose.

LITTELL: That's very true. I had an encounter across the years too with one of the graduate exchange students, Lev Skvortsov, who studied at Columbia and then was the adviser and right-hand man to Demichev, the Minister of Culture whom I escorted on his tour of the United States, and then saw frequently again during my time in Moscow. I saw him last at the CSCE meeting in Hungary, in Budapest, in 1985. This was the big cultural CSCE conference. Now Skvortsov, I think, was never quite the liberal that Yakovlev, or maybe even Kalugin developed into. But he was very useful in our contacts with Demichev because he understood the United States, and you could put things across to Demichev through Skvortsov that way. I remember one of the funniest examples of that though was on a tour that Demichev made here in the United States. We went up to New York to the opening of a Soviet exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum, and as we came into the exhibit in Demichev's entourage, his security man went out ahead as he would in any crowded situation in the Soviet Union, pushing people bodily out of the way, which Americans don't take to too well, and he pushed a young woman who thought he was a masher or something, and started beating him over the head with her handbag. He shoved her up against the wall, and looked around with a look of astonishment on his face, and Skvortsov ran up and said, “Look comrade, we don't do this in the United States. These Americans don't understand.” So this situation with him being taken for a masher or mugger was defused.

I think these programs under the agreement, the educational exchanges, were certainly among the most important, if not the most important. I was in Moscow, of course, and was renegotiating the cultural agreement when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and we discontinued the negotiations. But the embassy, as well as the academic community, lobbied very actively when we were cutting off the other exchanges in retaliation for the invasion of Afghanistan, to keep the educational exchanges going, because it was such a problem of building up the infrastructure among the universities across the years, that if you cut it off, its not like performing arts where you could pick up again the next day. It would be years before you could build it up again, so the educational exchanges were preserved, whereas other exchanges were discontinued at that time, as you'll recall.

There were some other exchanges that I was involved with before and after the agreement, which we had high hopes for but which didn't prove to be as successful as anticipated, and these were in the area of films. The Hollywood film producers for a time came to the Moscow Film Festival but they learned fairly rapidly that there was no commercial benefit in it. The Soviets weren't willing to pay the prices for American films they could get anyplace else in the world. And also there was the problem of pirating of films; showing them without paying fees or copyrights, and so on. So that program diminished rather rapidly. The interest in films and the efforts we made under the agreement to exchange documentary films never really took off because the films the Soviets sent us were either propagandistic or rather boring, and we could never establish that they showed ours. So that didn't pan out too well either.

Books is another area. The American book publishers came to the Moscow Book Fair across the years, and we always had this resultant publicity about censorship, which was interesting. But once again the only books the Soviets bought, or allowed to be bought, were the scientific technological books, and the book publishers, who were quite commercially minded, learned they didn't have to come to the Book Fair to sell the scientific technological books. So that fell off.

Radio and television really never got started for the same reason as the films. The Soviet products tended to be either loaded with propaganda freight, or boring, and we could never establish that they were using ours the way they were supposed to.

Q: Some of the things you've touched on there reminds me of the difficulties in dealing with exchanges with the Soviet Union were compounded by the fact that you obviously had a commercial interest on the side of many American sponsors; not all, the universities, of course, were different. And the fact that on the Soviet side you had a very strong interest in emphasizing scientific and prestigious events. In some of this the Soviets had a great deal to offer. I'm thinking here particularly the performing arts where the great Soviet productions like the Bolshoi Ballet, and the Kirov Ballet, and others, the Moiseyev dancers, and so on, came to the United States. And, of course, the interest on the side of the American entrepreneur sponsoring this, often Sol Hurok was to get the Soviet production into as many cities as possible to make as big a profit from it as possible. And, of course, there was a great interest on the part of American cities throughout the country to receive these events, and they did get very warm receptions, and rightly so. The other side of the coin was that our productions going to the Soviet Union were being sort of sealed off, as I said before, to certain cities. So we had a great deal of difficulty in trying to some degree to limit the Soviet access to the United States, not for its own sake, but for the sake of trying to wedge out of them some wider visitations in the Soviet Union of the big American artistic companies.

LITTELL: Yes, the American performances were enthusiastically received by those who could get to them in the Soviet Union, but the tickets were paid for in rubles, which could not be exported from the Soviet Union, nor converted. So what it amounted to was the Soviets were making a lot of dollars in the United States, and we were paying out dollars to take American groups to the Soviet Union. So they were benefitting both ways, although I do think, despite the great success that the Soviet performing arts groups had in the

United States, once again they were in competition with all of the world; whereas American groups in the Soviet Union were quite unique, and were especially popular for that reason.

Q: It's very hard for anyone that was not there in those years; if you're going back to the '50s, to realize to what degree that was a closed society, particularly in Moscow. You could not talk to anyone. Everyone was afraid to speak. The surveillance — not just on the embassy people — but on all Americans, or all foreigners, was very close and often oppressive. Of course, that became a different problem later on when great numbers of people began to go as tourism was allowed to take place, and as more exchange groups, both informal and formal, began to take place. The KGB just couldn't cover it all in the same way they once did, although they certainly continued to try. But it was a terribly closed situation. I remember going in and feeling I'm going into a totally different world — this was in 1956, before anything opened up. It's hard to recall that climate anymore.

LITTELL: Yes. Well, I remember too that when you would fly out from the Soviet Union on leave, or on consultation in Washington or wherever, when you crossed the border of the Soviet Union you could feel literally a physical weight lift from your shoulders.

Q: Yes, I remember the feeling too.

LITTELL: It was a psychological problem too because you didn't want to get a Soviet citizen with whom you were friendly in trouble. If you got too friendly with a Soviet, you had to leave it up to his or her judgment but you were always worried that, out of loyalty, they would get themselves in trouble. And they could get themselves in real trouble in those days. They could wind up in the camps for associating with Americans and being accused of passing on information to them.

Q: Even on trips where you did find much more of an opportunity to speak to people, and the awareness of the control system was not as great in the other regions. Perhaps it was in a few of the large cities like Leningrad and Kiev, but when you really got out in the boondocks so to speak, no. But even there I think we all tried to have one conversation

only with people, and you never went back because they always had the excuse that they were called in by the KGB, and they would be called in as a result of the conversation, of saying, "Well this is something that just happened because I was thrown in with this individual;" and they could beg off. But if they were involved in subsequent conversations they really would be in deep trouble.

LITTELL: That's very true, and then another aspect for us traveling as Americans; we always traveled together for protection, but in the Intourist hotels those friendly Soviets who sat at your table were obviously KGB. They weren't valid Soviets, and you could have a conversation with them but you always had to be a little wary of that too. But you did encounter some "Nasto Yashchii," real genuine Soviet people, and those instances you remember, and treasure.

Q: The second side of an interview with Wallace W. Littell. My name is Robert Martens conducting it.Could we go further now into the differences between the two periods, the 1950s when you were there the first time, and then some 25 years later when you went back the second time? Maybe beginning on the theme of to what extent had the embassy grown, to what extent were there differences in the housing and facilities that people had in the embassy, and different conditions of life and perhaps beyond that you could get into some comments on the fairly large number of ambassadors that you worked for over those years. And then we might go further into some of the people you knew at a later period. We haven't got into that quite as extensively.

LITTELL: Well, as we've indicated in our discussions on difficulties of having contacts with the Soviet people, the difference between the '50s and the late '70s-early '80s, was almost like night and day. So far as the physical situation is concerned, when I came into Moscow in 1956 of course, I was establishing a new office, and a new home and so on. The embassy was much smaller, had much less in the way of facilities...

Q: I might interject here, since I was affected by this personally being a bachelor, there was no housing whatsoever outside the chancery building, with the one exception of the ambassador's residence at Spaso House. And, in fact, I was called in earlier because a bachelor was PNGed — declared persona non grata — and I came in to take his place because I was a bachelor trained in Russian affairs, and otherwise no one lived outside the embassy except you. You're the one exception.

LITTELL: That's right. Well, when I came in in '56 I spent — I forget how many weeks, but it was too many — in a Soviet hotel, the Leningradskaya, which was not one of the better hotels even, and when my family came we were there in a single room, my wife and two small children and myself, and trying to feed the children in the dining room was an impossibility. The service was not fast to say the least, and with children it was really impossible. We finally got a hot plate and settled on that for our meals. But we moved then into a cold water flat on Khoklovskii Peraylok, actually not too far from the Kremlin, in the center of the city. It was in an area where they had a few foreigners. Our next door neighbor was Ralph Parker, the British defector who wrote all the Korean germ warfare propaganda, and every time I went to work he'd come over and try to get my wife to come have tea with him. I think he wanted some English-speaking company, so that was undoubtedly part of it too. And then there was an American black named Robinson who had come over years ago, who lived there too. Otherwise our neighbors were all Soviets, and naively, undoubtedly, when we moved there we thought we would be able to make friends with our Soviet neighbors. As a matter of fact, the children adopted our children and on a rainy day our house would be full of Soviet children. But the parents would never come in, they'd not even come to pick up the child. They'd send an older child to get them, and although we had friendly, nodding, relationships, we had no real contacts with them.

Eventually then the diplomatic housing areas were established and we moved into one of the first ones, the one out toward the Prospekt Mira...Permanent exhibition.

Q: Yes, I went into that later, 1958, I believe.

LITTELL: Yes, and we moved in, and as you recall the central section of the building were Americans and French, and then one wing was Indians and Third World, and the other wing was the East Germans, Albanians, and Chinese and so on. We were all in the same project, but we didn't have too much to do with each other. But the housing was obviously much better than our first place.

When I went back in 1979, of course, I was Counselor for Press and Culture, so I was in the north wing of the embassy in one of the bigger apartments, along with the Political Counselor and the DCM, and the Counselor for Agriculture. The embassy was much bigger. We had people in seven or eight diplomatic projects out around the city; there were two on Kutuzovskii Prospekt, three on Leninsky Prospekt, and it was a much, much larger embassy. I was a one-man staff in 1956, of course, starting up the Press and Cultural Section. When I was Counselor for Press and Culture, '79 to '83, I had 16 members in Moscow, two in Leningrad, and one in Kiev.

Q: So you had gone almost from 1 to 20 in size.

LITTELL: Yes, in size, and of course the program, the heart of which was the cultural exchanges program, was broader than that too because, as you know, we monitored the Voice of America and gave guidance to it. We had the various informational operations, including America Magazine and a cultural bulletin. We had liaison with Soviet information organizations as well, and tried sometimes successfully to exchange something like films or TV programs with them. So it was a much bigger operation until Afghanistan came along at least, which was fairly early in my second stay.

I did have a number of ambassadors across the years. In the early period the two that you had, Chip Bohlen and Tommy Thompson, who were old Soviet experts from the original group of American- Soviet experts among the Foreign Service officers. There was no

thought other than Harriman, I guess, of a political appointee ambassador in those days. But in the '79 to '83 period, when I first came, Mac Toon was ambassador, and of course he was an old timer in Soviet and Eastern European affairs.

Q: A career officer, yes.

LITTELL: A career officer; he had been my ambassador in Yugoslavia. He was a very knowledgeable, somewhat acerbic personality, but I got along with all the ambassadors. I guess Chip Bohlen in '56 was a little uneasy about having somebody from the United States Information Agency join his staff, even though I was transferred to the State Department for the assignment. He was primarily interested in political reporting, and political developments, and I think his feeling was that, at best, I wouldn't cause any trouble and, at worst, I might cause him considerable problems. As a matter of fact, when he left, he congratulated me on not screwing up, and not causing any problems. That was about the nicest thing he had to say, although I liked him very much, and liked his wife as well, and have seen the daughters off and on since.

Q: He was very cautious on other things too though, and with some reason, given the fact that he went there, I guess, just after the declaration of persona non grata of his friend, George Kennan. I remember that no one was allowed to drive in the embassy; I think there was one exception, because there had been an accident previously, and the Soviets had come down very hard and tried to set up a kind of political incident out of this. So the result was that because of the fear of Soviet retaliation, no one was allowed to drive. We had to go by chauffeured car, or walk, or take the subway.

LITTELL: Yes. You may remember, however, I was one of the first of the embassy officers to get a Soviet driver's license. I bought a Pobeda, which looked like every other Soviet taxicab, to get around in. The exam was very tough. You had to know a lot about how to repair an engine in the car, and all sorts of things, as well as a test on all the traffic rules and regulations in order to get it, and I felt fortunate to get the license and have the car.

Incidentally, referring to my old friend Boris Pavlovich Stepanov, the head of SoyuzPechat, and his sense of humor, I took a long trip fairly early checking on the distribution of America Magazine in cities around the southern Soviet Union including Kharkov, Kiev, KostovnaDonu and Dnepropetrovsk, and I found out to my surprise that the SoyuzPechat in these cities all said they wanted more of the magazine. They said they couldn't get enough of them, and by then we were beginning to get returns of “unsold” copies up in Moscow. It was one of the rare examples of lack of coordination in that sort of thing that I found. When I came back and reported this to Stepanov and gave him the figures on what so- and-so had said, he turned to Parasov, his deputy, and said, “We've got to take that car away from him, he's getting around too much!”

Q: What about some of the other ambassadors then?

LITTELL: Tommy Thompson, of course, when he came to Moscow, had come from Vienna where there was a good sized USIS operation, and he had had recent experience with it, and was much more relaxed about my situation. And I think he understood it much better than Bohlen did. So I had an easier time with him than I did with Bohlen, although I had no real problems with Bohlen.

Mac Toon, I had served with in Yugoslavia, and he was the ambassador in Moscow when I came in 1979. As we've said, he was an old timer, and an expert on the Soviet Union of his generation comparable to Bohlen and Thompson in their generation. So we got along extremely well. This was in the period before Afghanistan. He left then and there was a period with a Charg# d'Affaires, Mark Garrison, who was a very able, knowledgeable, Soviet specialist — a young guy.

And then Ambassador Watson came in — of the IBM Watsons — as a political appointee. Now he had some background in the Soviet Union in that he had been a pilot — in fact, the personal pilot for the American General who was the liaison with the Soviets at the

time of the World War II airlift, which ran over Great Falls, Montana, Seward AFB in Alaska, Anchorage, on to the Soviet far east, and then to Moscow.

Q: During World War II, yes.

LITTELL: Right, delivering planes during World War II, and he came back with high hopes of building on this to improve relations with the Soviet Union, but of course, Afghanistan came along right away. He was a good ambassador, I would say, I'm sure in contrast to many political appointees. He did not think he knew everything about U.S.-Soviet affairs, so he relied heavily on his staff — intelligently on his staff. He and Mrs. Watson were very good for staff morale in this time of the post-Afghanistan period when things tightened up and contacts were cut off to a considerable extent. They did a lot of things at Spaso for the staff, and I think they were excellent in that way.

After he left Jack Matlock, who has just concluded his tour as ambassador there, was Charg# d'Affaires for some months, and then Ambassador Art Hartman came in. Art Hartman was a European specialist, but not a Soviet specialist.

Q: Basically a western European specialist, and had been Assistant Secretary though.

LITTELL: That's right. But once again, he was an intelligent man who relied on his staff. He was a quick learner too. I must say, he and his wife were really excellent for staff morale in a difficult period, and I have a lot of respect and affection for the Hartmans.

On the contrasts, I think for me the greatest contrast was the personal contacts I had. Even in the post-Afghanistan period the creative intelligentsia, the theater directors like Lyubimov, writers and poets like Aksyonov, before he left the Soviet Union, Bella Akhmadulina, Andrey Voznesensky, Yevtu Shenko, these people were all accessible, and I got to know them very well, particularly Bella Akhmadulina, and I spent a lot of time at her dacha with creative intelligentsia from all areas of the Soviet Union when they came into Moscow, but particularly those in Moscow. I spent a good bit of time at

Voznesensky's dacha too and was very fond of him. One of the most interesting things was the contact that I had through Bella Akhmadulina with the Pasternaks and the time I spent in Pasternak's dacha, which his daughter-in-law, Bella, and others were trying to preserve as a museum and memorial to him.

Q: Boris Pasternak was deceased.

LITTELL: He was deceased. He was buried, of course, in the little cemetery looking right across to his dacha. At that point his friends, and followers, were trying to get the Pasternak dacha preserved as a museum to him. There was a lot of Pasternakian memorabilia there, including the piano that Richter, the night that Pasternak died, played all night in tribute to him.

Q: I knew Richter, when he came to the United States.

LITTELL: So I got to know them well, and actually played a small role, I think, in helping preserve the dacha. The Party wanted to turn it over to some of their top Party people, and I brought in all the western ambassadors that I could round up, and I knew a number of them; there were four or five of them who had served with us in the '50s...

Q: In junior roles then probably.

LITTELL: Giovanni Migliolo, who was the Italian ambassador, and there were a number of others, all came out and put in a good word for the preservation of the dacha. And I was very much involved in things going on at the Taganka in the period when Lyubimov was struggling most actively to try to get things produced there, and I sort of lived the disappointments, and the triumphs, along with him. So it was for me a very rewarding time in a period when our program was cut back substantially because of Afghanistan. I had more time to meet and talk with, and get to know, these people very well. And, of course, I still see Aksyonov in Washington, and see Bella and others when they come. It was a very rewarding period for me in that way.

Q: And they were able to continue even after Afghanistan to have these contacts without too much retribution. Did they ever voice any fears to you about maintaining contact?

LITTELL: Well, the KGB was omnipresent, and they'd even show up at the dachas occasionally too, I think, try to intimidate. But by that time the well-known — internationally known — people felt safe enough that they weren't going to be sent off to Siberia, and although Sakharov, of course, was banished, it was not Siberia. So they did, they came to our apartment and to Spaso House regularly.

Q: Very different from the early period.

LITTELL: It was entirely different. They would even come to my apartment in the embassy for a dinner, or a reception, with a written invitation, and they'd show it to the Soviet militia guards down there at the entrance. I'd always have a staff member, or be down there myself, to escort them through, but they would come. And I was invited to their apartments, and dachas regularly.

Q: Did you ever get intimations of hope on the kind of major changes that took place later in the Gorbachev period? Back then did people see it at all, that there might be major change coming down the road in five-ten-fifteen years?

LITTELL: They all believed in change, but like those of us who served there, thought of it as long-term change. I think they, as well as we, thought the system wasn't viable either as a system for dealing with human beings, or as a viable economic or political system. But none of them in their wildest dreams, I think, thought it was going to come this rapidly, as none of us did. I can remember saying to people who asked me, having served elsewhere in Eastern Europe, could this change happen in the Soviet Union? And I remember saying, if they got a leader who would lead them to a counterpart to the Prague Spring as Dubcek did in Czechoslovakia, maybe it could happen. But the thing that astounded me, and I never would have predicted would happen, was that the Party would give up its leading

role, and vote itself out of existence! That I never foresaw, and I'm sure none of them did. They had great hopes for the future, and the hopes were frequently dashed. They worked very hard to support each other and to help each other. I remember when Giorgi Vladimov was threatened with being sent back to the camps, having been there of course a good bit of time; there was a lot of behind the scenes support for him, not only at the dachas, but people approaching any contacts they had to try to help him out, including in the KGB. Eventually he was expelled to the west.

Q: How much were there sort of watertight compartments between groups? For example, you're dealing primarily with the creative intelligentsia who obviously did an awful lot to help each other out. Did you feel that there were sort of cross-channels to people in the economic field, in the political field, at all? Of course, the Party was much more dominant in those other areas, but was there a sense of some areas of liberalization, and some areas where one wanted to assist people in areas other than your sort of professional colleagues?

LITTELL: Yes. There were trusted friends, and when I mean trusted friends, it was a small circle. The Soviets understandably, when they are in a group, know everybody there, and they trust everybody there.

Q: Or they know who not to trust.

LITTELL: And they know very well who not to trust. And occasionally if a member of the group fell by the wayside, it was really a great blow to them. I remember the Metropole incident. This was a publication that a group of them put out — Aksyonov was particularly active in it, but Bella Akhmadulina and Andrey Voznesensky contributed to it. This was an unauthorized publication put out by Soviet writers and poets and got a lot of attention, of course, in the Soviet Union as well as abroad. It was published in Germany and in the United States initially and has never been published in the Soviet Union. It's the thing that really got Aksyonov put under such pressure that he left and his citizenship was revoked.

One of these people — one of the contributors sort of backtracked — and there was much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth about that, and examination of why, and why they could have trusted him, and so on, which was quite interesting. They had friends in other areas of Soviet life stretching into the government — trusted people in the government. Not trusted completely maybe, but substantially, and these people would turn up at the dachas and hear some very sensitive conversations.

Q: Would some of these be at the Party Central Committee, or Politburo level?

LITTELL: Well, Lyubimov, and others, had contacts in the Central Committee. As a matter of fact Andropov was a protector of Lyubimov. They had these contacts, but these people never turned up at the dachas. The people who turned up out at the dachas on the weekends for these long discussions of how they were going to do this or that, or say this or that, or say to the world, were lower level people. But some in the government and in other areas of life, including sports and all areas of culture, of course...

Q: Including the cultural bureaucracy...the people in the Ministry of Culture, or radio-television committee, that sort of thing, Pravda, Izvestia.

LITTELL: Now, Voznesensky's wife, Zoya Boguslauskaya, was a Party member, and also was influential in the Writer's Union. She was not really accepted into the most sensitive situations, but everybody knew she was looking out for Andrey's best interests, and for the best interests of his friends who were people in the inner circles of the cultural intelligentsia, so you had that sort of thing.

Q: There was probably some effort to protect her by not bringing her into some of the more sensitive things that she would be in a position to reveal when she talked to others, or be put under any kind of indirect pressure.

LITTELL: I'm sure that was part of it although the strongest part, I think, was that she was a Party member and therefore she was not considered to be completely trustworthy.

Q: Are there any other comments on the difference between the periods?

LITTELL: Well, of course, as far as the program was concerned, the exchanges program was the heart of my program operation with the big staff in the '79 to '83 period. And when the bulk of the exchanges were discontinued because of Afghanistan, there was considerable talk about decreasing the staff. And as a matter of fact, the officer in Kiev and one of the officers in Leningrad were cut and a couple slots on my staff in Moscow, but we were able to do enough contact work and reporting, and things like the more extensive monitoring of VOA and that type of thing, so that we were able to preserve the staff. I think there was a feeling too, if you cut out the exchanges staff it was going to take you a long time to build up the contacts in the universities again. It's a good training assignment for a young officer, and if you cut those training slots out, what are you going to do when relations are normalized again?

Q: Yes, as they indeed were.

LITTELL: So the staff for the most part, was preserved. As far as the exchanges program was concerned, I had sort of a personal interest in trying to get some true cultural exchangees into the Soviet Union. We did succeed briefly in getting students into the Bolshoi Ballet. We had a young woman — with whom I'm still in touch — who studied at the Bolshoi. She was from Ballets West. We had two at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, a singer and a string instrument student; and we had a student at Gatis in literature, particularly drama. This is the theater school. So we did have some success there. I think that it was a very good training ground for American students, even though some of them came to feel that they'd have been better off staying at their home university for that year than going abroad so far as completing their doctorates was concerned, and in getting on in their academic career. I think the ones who really thought about it deeply, and who had the experience, felt it was a very valuable experience. And as you've indicated, the Soviet students certainly benefited by it.

Q: At least some did.

LITTELL: Right.

Q: Let me ask, perhaps in concluding this Russian part, unless you have anything more to say, that looking back philosophically, you've been a witness to enormous change over a period of four decades basically, to what degree do you think the exchange program contributed to the course of developments — the liberalization of Soviet society, the opening up, and any comments you might have on that process?

LITTELL: There's no question in my mind but what our exchanges across the years, and our information operations, played a role in this. However, I realistically think it was things like the secret speech and the...

Q: ...internal developments.

LITTELL: The internal developments which then were supplemented by the things we did. It enabled people to participate in the exchanges, or to come and see an American exhibit, or perhaps if they were fortunate, get to an American concert, or have contact with a guide at an exhibit, and talk to him or her. This type of thing, I think, was important and it opened their eyes very much to, not only what was going on in the United States and the western world, but also to how strongly their internal situation contrasted, and how unfavorably it contrasted with the situation in the United States and the west, which built more internal pressures for change. I think too, a point that I've made before, the Soviet effort to control these programs once they had admitted them, was completely counterproductive, because once they had admitted them to the Soviet Union, even though you couldn't get a ticket maybe, or couldn't get to something, or couldn't subscribe to a publication, it was legal. Therefore you used every avenue possible to get access to it, and they weren't afraid to come to American things the way they were in the '50s, in our day there together. And also it was counterproductive, because if the Soviets tried to control it as much as they did, and

limit it to tried and true Party members or trustworthy people, then it must be a true picture, there must be something to it. The Soviet people came out with a more positive picture of the United States and the west than would have been the case otherwise.

Q: I agree with all of those points. I always felt that even back in the '50s there was a general realization that the Soviet Union was on the wrong track on the part of the people. There was almost total disbelief, and I saw that in incident after incident. It was very visible in the joke system in which you could never hear a sex joke in the Soviet Union because they weren't sexy enough. The jokes were all highly political, and kind of struck at the heart of the system but you could release those deeply felt, but covered up feelings, through jokes that you could not do otherwise.

Another aspect of that period, I think, was that there was a great sense of hopelessness, and a feeling of being out of it. The system would always be there. The controllers were omnipresent, and everlasting. One of the things I think that the program of exchanges and information, and all this, helped to do — and I have to repeat, helped — was that it contributed to a gradual increase in courage in which people felt that there was some kind of outside contact, and therefore you were not as isolated. That the society was gradually being pried open by degrees, little by little, and I don't mean pried open from outside, and it was being pried open in multiple ways, mostly internal, but with this outside factor coming into play as well. I think one of the great contributions of this program over the years was, not just what it did in respect to the thoughts of individuals, because that was always there to some degree, it became more overt later on, but was in the allowance by the system of doing more, of having contacts abroad. And every little step along this way prepared the ground for more steps. Everybody would say, well if he can do such and such, why can't I do it? Even a Party official who has not changed much, can make a trip, why can't I have travel abroad? Or if we're allowed to go see this kind of event, why can't we see another kind of event, and so on and so on, all gradually building up drop by drop. In fact one always had to be careful not to push too hard. If it went too fast, then you would cause the Party to crack down, but it was always a matter of gradualism, of seeing what the traffic

would bear, but not too much beyond it. I don't mean this was us, the outside world doing this, but it was within the system, and primarily within the system that this was going on, but all this kind of contributed together to the flow of events that has since taken place.

LITTELL: Another point we've discussed on occasion that I ran into in my Soviet and Eastern European assignments, and you did too, was an inability on our part, and on the part of our ambassadors and others, and maybe the State Department too on occasion, to believe what we were hearing. I can recall on occasion an ambassador in a staff meeting saying, “We don't really know what these people are thinking. We really don't know at all what these people are thinking.” I took that as sort of a defeatist kind of thinking because when you get out and do talk to people, and get around the country, you found it hard to believe sometimes that these people had any faith whatsoever in their society, and in all this garbage that was being shoved at them. As it turns out that was largely true. I used to argue this; I can recall in staff meetings arguing it, although I must say I have been surprised at how fast the thing collapsed once the artificial controls that held it together were removed.

Q: I must say I saw the same thing in Indonesia though where the totalitarian system which seemed to be omnipresent there too, and there was a tremendous sense of fear and terror. Maybe even greater than in the Soviet Union. When it suddenly collapsed, it collapsed so fast — it did take two or three months for people to adjust, but within six months people had sort of thrown off these intellectual fetters that they had on them before, and were talking like sensible human beings openly again.

LITTELL: Of course they weren't saddled with it as long as the Soviets. But in the Soviet Union, if you could ever indoctrinate an individual in such a system, they certainly had the time to do it. Even Eastern Europe didn't have that much time, but they weren't successful anywhere in the long run.

Q: It didn't succeed. I think I saw that in the '50s, and I think you did, and others, although I remember that people that were higher up in the embassy and therefore traveled less, tended to be more mesmerized by the system.

LITTELL: The people they saw were the top Soviets, and what they saw was the show the Party put on, and we peons got out and traveled around and talked occasionally to a Nasto Yashchii Chelovek, a real valid Soviet citizen who told us what he or she was thinking.

Q: I remember coming back from trips and you'd have all these experiences where you saw the degree of disbelief, and I would sit down — and I had to read the Soviet press every day and report on it and most of the reporting was based on the press because that was the only source for real political information — and you would do that, and about two or three weeks later you would be saying this is two different worlds, and I'm not sure I really experienced those things that happened out there. Then you'd become so filled with this propaganda view, and then you'd go out on a trip again, and after you went out there you couldn't believe that the system was working the way it was in Moscow. Then you would start talking to people, and seeing how the diversity under the surface was really much greater than it appeared from just looking at the system, or the propaganda.

LITTELL: The Moscow scene was a trap too in that you were not only reading the press, and focusing really too much on little signs in the press, and little things that slipped out, and talking about that in staff meetings, and rarely talking about what people saw and encountered on trips. But also the diplomatic cocktail party gossip was all about what was read between the lines in the press or rumors, often planted, about what was going on.

Q: The date is October 1, 1992. This is tape 2 of an oral history of Wallace W. Littell. The first tape concerned his experiences in the Soviet Union. In addition to Pic Littell's involvement with the Soviet Union, which we've covered in the previous session, it should be noted that he also had considerable experience in dealing with Eastern Europe. He was briefly in Poland in 1946 with UNRRA, and was the Public Affairs Officer in Warsaw,

1961 to '65; was similarly Cultural Counselor in Yugoslavia from 1970 to '74; and also in East Berlin, or the GDR, when we first began to have a mission there in 1974 to '76. He also was Deputy Assistant Director, and later Assistant Director, for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1965 to '70. And after his retirement in Moscow in 1983, he returned out of retirement to be a participant in the CSCE Cultural Forum in Budapest in 1985.

I think the way we might proceed now is to begin with the places where you served overseas, other than the Soviet Union, beginning with Poland, and then after that we can make some more general observations on Eastern Europe. So starting with Poland and your great insights...

LITTELL: Well, I don't know about great insights, but I have always had a warm spot in my heart for Poland and the Poles dating from my time there, January to April, and June and July of '46 right after the war, when I was there with UNRRA, basically with relief supplies, horses, cattle, livestock and food for our allies who had suffered so much during the war.

My interest in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe dates from that time. It was my first real encounter with Soviet troops and with the Soviet and East European situation. I learned some lessons personally, and also from Polish friends I met at the time, which opened my eyes a bit about our Russian allies, and also gave me an insight into Poland which was valuable during my service there later. I was Public Affairs Officer at the embassy from '61 to '65, and it was an interesting experience for me. It was really great to be in Poland after the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was so tight and controlled during the time that I was there in the mid- '50s, and Poland, although a communist-dominated country, was noticeably more open. Contacts with the Poles were easy to come by, and I had some very good Polish friends, and still have Polish friends I'm in touch with.

So far as the program there is concerned, we had an active, and fairly typical Public Affairs program. The negotiations with the communist authorities were sometimes difficult, but we did a lot. We had one program there which I considered to have been particularly effective;

and this was what was called the Informational Media Guarantee Program. We had a lot of Polish currency at the time, which was derived from the sale of agricultural products, and for some of our programs we could draw on that. For the Informational Media Guarantee Program, which we negotiated the first year that I was there it was the other way around in that we supplied dollar currency — hard currency — in the amount of a million and a half dollars a year from our budget for the Poles to use to purchase American informational media and were reimbursed in PL 480 zlotys. This program ran all the way from films, and books and magazine subscriptions, to performance rights on theatrical and operatic and musical works. It was particularly effective in bringing American books into Poland. The annual Warsaw Book Fair was a big event for us, and for American book publishers, because they had a guaranteed amount of hard currency which the Poles could apply to purchase of American books. It was very effective for that reason. The American book publishers representatives came in and it was a big annual event. Otherwise the Polish program was quite a standard exchange program.

Q: Could I intervene here for a moment, based on my own involvement with the exchange program with Eastern Europe. I recall that a distinction might be made, and you can perhaps comment on this, that in regard to the Soviet Union we had a formal exchange agreement and we were very conscious of reciprocity, and trying to make sure that U.S. access to the Soviet Union was somewhat at least comparable with Soviet access to the United States. I recall from being involved with the student program that we didn't really care about reciprocity at all with Poland. We were glad to accept large numbers of Polish students from the beginning without any thought of reciprocity. We didn't have any very tight controls over them. It was very much like a program that one might have had with western Europe, or some other part of the world, maybe not totally, but it was much closer to that than it was to the Soviet program. And, in fact, the only somewhat reciprocal formal exchange agreement we had, other than the Soviet Union, was with Romania. So we tended to do the same elsewhere, but it was probably more noticeable in regard to Poland than with other Eastern European countries as well.

LITTELL: Yes, I think this is very true. Of course, there are so many Polish-Americans, and the ties are so great and so many Poles have relatives in the United States, that a lot of young people were invited over by their relatives to go to school, or their visas were facilitated by relatives. We did not keep a close count at all. We had a sprinkling of American exchange students who were either Polish-Americans, or were particularly interested in Poland. And some of them have gone on and been leaders in academia in the United States in American universities in Polish studies.

One particularly good program across the years too was the tie we had with the Iowa Writer's Program — Paul Engle's program at the University of Iowa, which trained a lot of, not only Polish, but also other East European writers in writing techniques and furthered their careers. We had a number of distinguished graduates of that program.

Q: What about large performing arts groups? Did we have those going to Poland as well?

LITTELL: We tended to depend on what went to the Soviet Union for the most part. If a group went to the Soviet Union, then we would try to get it to stop off in Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, what have you, on the way back. And we were generally successful in that. We had a number of performing arts groups, and we had a number of individual performers. We even had some who were there for some period of time at the Warsaw, or other, operas — younger people mostly, who were just getting their training and moving ahead that way.

We had quite active sports exchanges which, of course, we had with the Soviet Union under the agreement too. But in Poland basketball was particularly popular. An old wrestling teammate, and colleague of mine who was an outstanding American wrestler and wrestling coach, came over and stayed with us for some time, sponsored by the Polish Olympic Committee while I was there. So it was a much more ad hoc, and open, reciprocal type thing. As I said, I liked the Poles a lot and worked with them well. The people in the responsible positions were, of course, subject to Party control and so on,

but there was not the generally negative foot-dragging attitude that you got from Soviet bureaucrats in the '50s. If they were permitted to do something, they'd do it and they'd do it well and enthusiastically. And, of course, the turnouts were great too for the programs there.

Q: Do you want to go on to Yugoslavia?

LITTELL: I was in Yugoslavia at a good time. The current situation is very painful for me because I...

Q: It was 1970 to '74.

LITTELL: As a matter of fact during my time there, we established reading rooms, or information centers, in all of the Republics but Montenegro, and were well on the way to establishing one there before I left. So I had friends and contacts in all of the Republics. I understand the current situation somewhat because I knew Yugoslavs all over Yugoslavia and I know the Serbs survived 500 years of the Ottoman empire, and the others have survived occupation of one sort or another and they are very tough, stubborn people. But they may be too stubborn for their own good at this point.

Q: Were the differences between the Serbs and Croats noticeable then, or was that papered over by the Tito dominance?

LITTELL: No, no. You knew the differences even though the official language was Serbo-Croatian, or Croato-Serbian depending whether you were in Zagreb or Belgrade. You knew the differences and you couldn't help but know because of the World War II period, and the hangover. Of course, the Croats and Slovenian, particularly the Croats, had a very strong fascist element during the Nazi period and the period of Nazi occupation in Croatia. There was a nominal independent Croatia under Nazi sponsorship, and they'd killed a lot of each other (Serbs and Croats). So you knew the antipathies existed and, of course, they are Slavs — both of them — but you do have the religious difference, the Roman Catholic

Croats and the Orthodox Serbs. And you have a difference in tradition. The Serbs fought the Turkish occupation for hundreds of years, and the Croats and Slovenian were under the Austro- Hungarian empire, or Italians in the case of the Slovenian. But there were the antipathies and the memories of World War II even then, and unfortunately, of course, they're being strengthened now.

Q: How would you compare your ability to operate in the information-cultural field with the Soviet Union and/or Poland? Perhaps more with Poland.

LITTELL: The difference between Poland and the Soviet Union was very great, as I said, although the Polish officials were subject to Party discipline and authority. In Yugoslavia the differences were not that great to what I experienced in Germany years ago. It was a good period. It was a period when the Yugoslavs welcomed the expansion of our information and cultural program in Yugoslavia; primarily because the Soviets, who, in the period before Tito's break with Moscow, had established information centers, would never let the Yugoslavs have information centers in Moscow or the Soviet Union, and the Yugoslavs were trying to pressure the Soviets by giving us more information centers because we gave them reciprocity if they wanted it. They could establish information centers in the United States. It didn't work out in that the Soviets, of course, did not let anybody establish information centers in the Soviet Union. But it meant that our activities were quite free. Occasionally we would run into the Party bureaucracy, but it was not a thing that bothered us a lot. To get our information centers we signed an information agreement with Yugoslavia, which was a state-to-state agreement, and which enabled them to have information centers in the United States if they wanted to establish them. But once they were established then we were in good shape for access to the Yugoslav people.

There were differences in negotiating among the Republics. I found the negotiations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has a dominant Muslim population — actually Herzegovina is solidly Muslim, but Bosnia has a larger Muslim population than either Orthodox Serb

or Catholic Croat, and I found the negotiations with the authorities there sort of mid-eastern, Arabic Turkish. I guess it was Ottoman empire Turkish, probably. But they were a little more devious, and difficult to deal with, but we were able to accomplish it. The Macedonians, on the other hand, were very forthcoming and really quite easy to deal with in the negotiations. But there are cultural and historical differences between the peoples.

Q: Since Yugoslavia had become a non-Warsaw Pact country, had broken with the Soviet Union, and was in a kind of non-aligned camp, and given the fact that American foreign policy tended to concentrate more on the sort of primary enemy and its adjuncts; the Soviet Union and what used to be called the satellite countries, and in our information programs we put a good deal of weight on the Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe, did you find that Yugoslavia didn't receive as much attention from the U.S. government as a result, or did it receive more or less equivalent attention to the rest of Eastern Europe, or can you make any such comparisons?

LITTELL: I think Yugoslavia did pretty well in the time that I was there. As I said, they were opening up to us in an effort to pressure the Soviets, and they trusted us more than they did the Soviets.

Q: I am thinking more of the U.S. government. Were we reluctant to send a large performing arts group that would go to the Soviet Union and to Poland, to Yugoslavia, because it had a lower priority. I'm just asking a question, I'm not...

LITTELL: No, I don't think that that was as much a factor as was the fact that we had the agreement with the Soviet Union, and were pretty well bound to fulfill it, and we didn't have that much money to use elsewhere. So we had to do a lot of scratching around on the independent contacts to bring groups into Yugoslavia. We did very well. We had a particularly successful jazz festival there which was sponsored by the Yugoslavs, but we brought the leading American jazz performers — they were all there. Satchmo was there,

Ella Fitzgerald was there. The whole gamut of jazz up to the younger, more modern ones. They were all there for the jazz festival at one time or another.

We had a film festival. Each year we'd have some stars there. Jack Nicholson came in one time, and we showed some American films including “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.” The Yugoslavs didn't have a lot of money to buy, but at least they didn't try to use films on the sly the way the Soviets did, or to get around purchase costs. They'd pay if they could, and if they couldn't they regretted it.

At the annual Dubrovnik festival, which is a performing arts cultural festival, we always had American representation. We had some very good groups there. We had the Merce Cunningham and Alwin Ailey dance groups. We had Martha Graham on one of the last tours that she made with her group. And we had some very fine musicians, and performing artists there at Dubrovnik. So the obstacles were not Yugoslav and not American, as much as just budgetary.

One thing that was interesting was that we had a very good and active Fulbright agreement in Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs paid 20% of the total costs in hard currency, and then we had dinars from the PL 480 program which we could use. So it was really a going Fulbright exchange program between Yugoslavia and the United States.

Q: Why don't we talk about East Germany. That was quite a breakthrough at the time because East Germany had been unrecognized for so many years.

LITTELL: I went to East Germany when I was approached by our Washington offices on it. We went in to open up the embassy in '74, and I went primarily because I had had a good long experience in West Germany, and actually had gotten to East Germany to the Leipzig Fair, or to East Berlin on occasion, but never had been able to really move around there. I went really because of my interest in Germany. It was not as big a job as I had had in Yugoslavia or Poland, or had subsequently, of course, in Moscow, but it was interesting. So I figured it was worth a two-year assignment, and it was. It was interesting. However, I

didn't think I'd find bureaucrats that were worse to deal with than the Soviets but the East Germans were really bad.

Once again, if they were permitted to do something, then they were much more efficient than the Soviets about helping you do it. But if they weren't, and most of the time they weren't, then the foot-dragging was very obnoxious. My contempt for the East German bureaucrat was exceeded by none I have met anywhere. But it was understandable. I was able to move around in East Germany quite freely, and knowing German as well as I did, and having the contacts that I had in the Church, and so on, I met a lot of people and talked to a lot of people. There's certainly no feeling on my part that there was a great degree of loyalty to the system there among the people.

Q: One might note too that since East Germany was so close to West Germany, and particularly since you had Berlin embedded in the middle of East Germany and one could, I suppose, hear West German radio, maybe television...

LITTELL: They could watch West German television. In fact, they watched nothing but West German television.

Q: So on the information side they were already getting a great deal of input from the West to a much greater extent than certainly the Soviet Union, and perhaps the rest of Eastern Europe. Did this result in an emphasis in your programs more on the cultural side and the information side, or if you had a fair amount of emphasis still on the information side, did it take a different form than it would have taken in the Soviet Union, and perhaps, say the relationship of a magazine to a newspaper kind of filling in the cracks and being more analytical, or something that was different than straight direct information, or direct news, since they were getting that anyway.

LITTELL: Well, once again, it was a beginning operation and a lot of my time there was involved in setting up the library, and the physical facilities, and hiring a staff, and getting things going that way. Also, I was a one-man staff, really, although I had a secretary with

me at the time. So it was a small operation. We did try to draw on cultural groups that came to West Germany, or particularly, Berlin being a city where a lot of them came. We had had some success that way, but we didn't in the time that I was there, have a lot of either performing arts programs or other programs going. We had scholars coming in quite frequently, and some students. Our old friend Bill Griffith used to come in regularly to East Berlin and he was always fun to take to the various ministries or to their research institute on the United States and Canada, paralleling the Soviet one, because he hauled them over the coals so unmercifully.

Q: This is a professor that was one of the major scholars dealing with the communist world?

LITTELL: Yes, that's right, Bill Griffith. Actually he was head of RFE in Munich for years, and then he was at MIT for many years, and Fletcher too. He's a guy with a lot of humor. Actually I used to take him in Moscow to see people including Primakov, who I see has just been named to be the first civilian head of the KGB. Primakov was head of their mid-east institute originally, and has been very close to Gorbachev; an adviser to Gorbachev.

The one problem we had in East Berlin, which was very comparable to the Soviet Union, was access to the embassy on the part of the public. We established a very good and attractive American library there, but very few people came in. They were intercepted a few blocks away and just not allowed to come in.

Q: We had that problem in Romania too in my time.

LITTELL: Although, of course, eventually we did get the cultural center in Romania.

Q: We had the cultural center when I was there. It came in shortly before I arrived, but access was difficult. There was a certain amount of pressure against going, and when people did go they were making a mark for themselves in the books of the Securitate, I'm sure.

LITTELL: Well, on rare occasions we would get harassment of this type to our library in Poland — there'd be some harassment there. In Yugoslavia, almost never; and in East Germany, almost always.

Q: What were your relations...were the West Germans establishing very much in the way of programs in East Germany, and was the interest on the part of the East Germans more in West Germany than in the United States?

LITTELL: At that point they didn't have diplomatic relations.

Q: Even then?

LITTELL: Yes, but they had a liaison office, which for all practical purposes was an embassy headed by an ambassador, but it was not called that. It was called a liaison office and he was not an ambassador. He was head of the liaison office. Obviously the East Germans had extensive contacts with the West but the West Germans were not allowed to do a lot of public things, for obvious reasons because the appeal was so great. And, as I mentioned before, the East Germans listened to West German and European radio, and watched nothing but West German television. I remember one time staying with a family in Leipzig at the fair who rented out a room. They were obvious Party members. They had a nice apartment in a building that had just Party members, and the two kids were running around in FDJ (communist youth) uniforms. But I came in at night after dinner and they were all gathered around watching West German television, so I said, “What's the matter? You can't get East German television here?” And they laughed, and said, “Oh, yes, its here, this channel here, but we never watch it.”

Q: Well, unless you have any other comments on East Germany, why don't we go to a somewhat broader subject of referring in part to your two periods in USIA in dealing with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as a whole, and perhaps you might have some comments on how that worked, the degree to which you had liaison and support from the

State Department, as well as the top management of USIA. Whether there might be some general comments on what the agency was trying to do in Eastern Europe in a long term philosophical or strategic objectives, and so on. Or whatever else you want to comment on.

LITTELL: I will begin by saying I was always much happier overseas than I was in Washington. I did not like, and do not like, the working situation and atmosphere in Washington, really. And much of that time my colleagues in the State Department, and USIA, and so on, were good friends, and people I had worked with overseas, so it wasn't their fault. It's much more the political situation. When you're at a fairly high level in Washington every new administration is a headache. You may have been a strong Kennedy supporter and a dyed-in-the-wool liberal, or you may have been an arch conservative, but you had trouble with the administration regardless of which it was. I think I probably had more trouble with the Kennedy administration, and the Carter administration, than I had with the ones I was less prone to support politically, or their political point of view.

I would say most of the time that I was in Washington the working relationships with the Department of State were very good. And as I said, when I was Deputy Assistant Director, Dick Davies was Assistant Director. He was a State Department officer, and we'd worked together across the years and were good friends and worked together very well all the time. And then in the Department, of course, we had people like you and Frank Siscoe and his office; Ralph Jones and other colleagues from overseas, and we worked extremely well together.

The only problem that I ever ran into really, was that one of the directors we had, Frank Shakespeare, wanted to set USIA up as an equal to the State Department in the policy side, and everything else, whereas foreign policy, of course, is made by the Department of State and has been right along, with input from other agencies like USIA. At any rate, he had an idea that he was going to work separately from, if not against the Department

of State. And that made for some unnecessary problems really, although, as I say, given the fact that relations were so good personally, those of us involved didn't usually have to pay much attention to that, nor did most of us sympathize with it. I think the idea that USIA should be on an equal footing in making foreign policy with the Department of State is just not what was intended, nor what makes sense anymore than having Agriculture or, say, CIA get too involved in making foreign policy, particularly against what's being done in the State Department. I had a good experience, good staff, a good experience in general in Washington but I was always happy to get back overseas. Only in one case did I really lock horns with a superior (Frank Shakespeare), which is bound to happen to you at some point. It all turned out well because it meant I was able to go overseas and get away from Washington. I didn't have to stick around and work for him anymore directly.

Q: What about the relationship with Voice of America, which is also part of USIA, but had its own organizational setup, had its own geographic divisions, and there were reports in the press from time to time that there were sometimes differences of approach between the two.

LITTELL: VOA is a big organization and its been around for a long, long time. In fact, it pre-dates USIA, as I do too, incidentally. When I began I was a year and a half or so under the State Department before USIA was established, and VOA has been around since the war years. They are a big organization, and they had a lot of inclination and tendency toward independence and sort of felt they should be independent of State Department foreign policy guidance, and USIA foreign policy guidance from the area offices, although there have been a lot of State Department officers, some very distinguished officers, who have been directors of VOA, or have been at VOA across the years. I guess that's a normal tendency, but there has never been any question in my mind but what we should have a unified foreign policy, and since the Department of State is the organization which is set up under our system of government as the foreign policy making organization that it should have it. Now, of course, you've got problems with Congress, too. There are all sorts of organizations that want to make foreign policy and some have the right to, and some

don't. USIA is not one of them, I would say, nor is VOA. You need a unified foreign policy for it to be effective.

Q: What about any view on long term approach? What you were trying to do with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union? Some of that has been commented on in regard to the Soviet Union, but is there anything that could be said separately, or in supplement regarding Eastern Europe?

LITTELL: No, I would say the situation is changing there, but in the immediate situation I think that there's not only an urgent need for the United States to play an intelligent, constructive, role, but also for the informational, educational program to get in more actively. I think that it's of vital importance for Soviets, not just from Moscow, but from all over the Soviet Union — we don't speak of Soviets anymore, but citizens of whatever it's going to be called. We should encourage them to come to the United States to have a look, and also to get guidance and experience, whether it be in business management, in economics, or in political democracy to the extent that we can show them the way to go. So I think we've achieved a lot of our goals in the area, but we can by no means sit back and relax. I think we're in for a very long, difficult, tense time in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The problem being that, as we said, these people, because they were prevented from getting information about the United States, tend to think of democracy and capitalism/free enterprise as something that's going to come immediately and automatically, that is the benefits of it...

Q: Streets paved with gold.

LITTELL: It's a long hard road to get to democracy and free enterprise, and we've got to help them on the road to it. And also, try to help them have the patience to go through the trials they've got to go through. Otherwise they're going to turn to demagogues, and there's going to be a real mess. You can see that now in all sorts of places. I like the Serbs perhaps the best of all the Yugoslavs and admire them for their past, but Milosevic is the

main problem in Yugoslavia at this point as a demagogic non- democratic, Serbian leader. In Georgia you have this same problem with Gamsakhardia.

Q: A man who is a dissident.

LITTELL: Right. A little while ago he was a dissident hero, and now he's a dictator, or trying to be. And there's this strong tendency to turn to the demagogue in situations like this, and we're liable to have it in the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. So we've got to do what we can to help the people realize the situation and facilitate their working toward a viable democracy of the sort that they can work out. It may not necessarily be exactly like ours, and there's some question whether ours is the most viable pattern for them, but toward democracy not dictatorship.

End of interview